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# To Christ through the Vedanta ?

ASHANANDA NAG

What is Vedanta ?

The name of Sankara is great in India and the Vedanta is making its influence felt in certain circles in Western countries. It is difficult to say what exactly fascinates some Western intellectuals in connection with the Vedanta. They probably get tired of the precise empiricism and concreteness of European thought, and are none too reluctant to let in the Eastern breeze that wafts sublime vagueness and vague sublimeness. This is not to say that Sankara, the greatest exponent of the Vedanta, is not one of the inspired thinkers of the world. In epistemology Sankara is as acute as Kant, and in spiritual insight he ranks amongst the great seers of Asia. What Sankara offers may be termed 'consistent monism', only in the sense that Sankara tries to do justice to the One; it may not be his fault altogether that in the process he has to ignore the claims of the Many. We are not aware that the Vedanta lends itself to a cut-and-dried interpretation; the interpretations of the original texts are as varied as the intellectual and spiritual apparatus that are brought to bear upon the disputed passages. When we say 'Vedanta', we really mean the Vedanta as Sankara interprets it, just as when we say 'London', we mean the capital of the United Kingdom, and not the town called London in Ontario, Canada. In his *Vedānta Sāra* (Quintessence of the Vedanta) Sadānanda (15th century A.D.) raises the question: 'What is the Vedanta?', and replies that the word 'Vedanta' means the Upanishads and the Śāriraka-sūtras. The author of *Sarva-Darsana-Saṅgraha* (A Compendium of all Philosophical Systems; 14th century A.D.), who is otherwise admirably impartial, allows himself to take sides and opines that Sankara's philosophy is the crown of philosophical speculation. Sadānanda follows in Sankara's footsteps. Denounced by those who did not see eye to eye with him as 'a Buddhist in disguise', Sankara nevertheless evoked the reverent admiration of many Hindu thinkers, and the force of his appeal has by no means spent itself to this day.

## The Influence of the Vedanta on Hindu Thought

It is not certain that the Vedanta has influenced the Hindu mind, or for that matter, the Indian mind, more than other schools of thought. The influence of Sāṅkhya has been immense, and the impress it has left on the Indian mind is indelible. The major portion of Hindu literature bears testimony more to the influence of Sāṅkhya than to that of the Vedanta. We have to take the Vedanta as we find it; and to divest it of

its associations with the Upanishads and the Sūtras would be to do violence to it. Monism of a sort may emerge out of the process, but that will not be quite the Vedānta. The expurgated Vedānta that is offered to their Western followers by Hindu missionaries is neither the Vedānta nor is it for the West. A few intellectuals have for reasons best known to themselves regarded themselves as representatives of the West; they are satisfied that the Vedānta is scientific and reasonable, but we should not run away with the impression that the West as a whole thinks likewise.

### Indian Christology and the Vedānta

It is desirable that we should keep our Christology and the Vedānta far apart. Vedāntic thought and Christian theology hardly meet; they are as wide asunder as pole from pole. Docetism would be the logical result of a fusion of Vedāntism and Christian theology. Sankara's Brahman is a mere abstraction. To the non-Vedāntist Brahman is the Great Unconscious and the Great Void; so reminiscent in fact is Sankara's Brahman of the Great Void that many Hindu thinkers of mediaeval India took Sankara for a Buddhist masquerading as an exponent of Brahman. A competent modern scholar, Professor S. N. Dasgupta, thought that Sankara's Vedānta was the Śūnya-Vāda (the Great Void) of Buddhism with Brahman superimposed upon it. How can we relate Brahman to the God of Christian theology? The God of Christian theology is a God of love. In Brahman passion cannot be, and the shadow of love never came near it. To all intents and purposes Brahman is a minus quantity; minus 7 is latent as an equational possibility in 100, for 107 minus 7 is 100. The Absolute may emerge as a logical fiction and function as a logical fiction, even as a minus quantity may arise as an equational possibility in connection with a plus quantity, but the plus quantity essentially remains a plus quantity. Only thus can Brahman be sublated in the Christian idea of God; Meister Eckhart's vision of God illustrates the point at issue.

### Christ and Hiraṇya-garbha

If we try to fit Christ into the Vedāntic scheme, we have to equate Him with Hiraṇya-garbha. The Rīgveda invests Hiraṇya-garbha with majesty and grandeur; Hiraṇya-garbha is the first-born of creation; he it is who holds the heaven and the earth; creation is his work; he is the son of Prajā-pati (the Lord of beings). Shorn of his pristine glory, Hiraṇya-garbha re-appears in Sankara's philosophy—a pale and dim copy of the brilliant original. The terrible disease, Māyā, afflicts Hiraṇya-garbha; and creation, his handiwork, is only a cosmic phantom. It cannot be said of Brahman, enveloped in Māyā, that He 'saw everything that he had made; and behold, it was very good'; and it is quite impossible for a Christian to equate Christ with Hiraṇya-garbha.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Prof. Paul Deussen thinks that the Upanishads and the Vedānta identify Hiraṇya-garbha with the 'knowing subject' of the universe. Space and time are derived from Hiraṇya-garbha; since space-time is the matrix of creation, Hiraṇya-garbha is associated with creation. The Svetāśvatara Upanishad says that the great magician Rudra created Hiraṇya-garbha. Sankara identifies Hiraṇya-garbha with 'exceeding luminous Intelligence'; and Rudra is equated with the Supreme Soul enveloped in Māyā, or exercising its Māyā. In the Matsya Purāṇa Hiraṇya-garbha is hailed as the refuge of gods and men, and is considered to be present in every living being.

## Raja Rammohan Roy and Sankara's Vedanta

Raja Rammohan Roy, who knew his Sankara well, wrote: 'Nor will youths be fitted to be better members of society by the Vedantic doctrines which teach them to believe that all visible things have no real existence, that as father, brother, etc., have no actual entity, they consequently deserve no real affection' (*Letter to Lord Amherst, 1823*). It is rather strange that the greatest historian of the Brahma movement, Pandit Shivanath Sastri, should have opined that Rammohan Roy was 'a Vedantist in metaphysics and a Christian in ethics'. It is indeed true that Rammohan Roy believed that the precepts of Jesus were 'admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of God . . . and well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human race'. But Rammohan's reverent appreciation of Christian ethics was based on his recognition of the fact that in Christianity, as in no other religions he was acquainted with, ethics derive from the very nature of 'the Author and Preserver of this harmonious system' (*Appeal to the Christian Public*). Rammohan Roy was dimly aware of the fact that only in Christianity are metaphysics and ethics not at loggerheads. Righteousness, holiness and love are eternal verities associated with the very nature of God and flow therefrom. In the Vedanta ethics is 'interims ethik'; and Vedanta metaphysics does not sanction or guarantee its validity. Here then is another hurdle Christianity will be up against in the field of Vedantic speculation. The same conflict between ethics and metaphysics is evident in the Gita; and it was a Hindu scholar, Professor S. N. Dasgupta, who made a pointed reference to this conflict in his monumental work, *The History of Indian Philosophy*.

Rammohan Roy allowed himself to believe that the Vedanta was essentially theistic. Many Indian and European students of the Śāriraka-sūtras have arrived at the same conclusion. It will be clear that Rammohan Roy did not accept Sankara as his guide, philosopher and friend.

### The Absolute and Emotional Fervour

The Absolute may remain a logical fiction, but the strange fact is that the idea of the Absolute calls forth all the emotional fervour we have learned to associate with theism. Sankara's beautiful and majestic prose and his still more beautiful poetry convince us that religious instincts are inherent in human nature and brook no suppression. They will surge up and begin to play even round the idea of the Absolute. Rāmānuja and Madhva thought that Sankara was striking at the root of Bhakti by propounding his illusion-theory. Many of us might think that inaction would be the logical conclusion of the illusion-theory, but Sankara springs a surprise. His *Ode to Atman* is one of the most beautiful pieces in the world's literature; and his *Viveka-chūdāmaṇi* is a religious classic of a very high order. Sankara himself was a man of action and established Vedanta-centres throughout the length and breadth of India. All these facts indicate that Sankara was better than his views; in his life Sankara transcended and corrected the limitations of his illusion-metaphysics; he asserted in his life what he denied in his theory.

## Christology must remain in the Framework of N.T. Theology

Christology must keep within the framework of New Testament theology both in India and in Western countries. Behind the theology of the New Testament is the spiritual experience of the writers of the book. Christian spirituality has its own modes and may not fit in with the Vedantic scheme, which is inextricably bound up with the doctrine of transmigration and with the acceptance of the *vita contemplativa* as the crown of human life. The Sūtras equate Moksha with the cessation of the cycle of existence; this conception of Moksha is an indication of the fear the Hindu mind has of life and of existence.<sup>2</sup> For the Christian redemption is, however, expressed in terms of life eternal. For the Vedantist the approach to the static and changeless entity called Brahman is through contemplation. The apprehension of the God of Christianity is through prayer and service—service of God and of fellowmen; contemplation is not sufficient to enable us to approach God Who is tremendously active in history. The Vedantist will relegate God to the realm of Māyā, the Christian will label Brahman a logical fiction.

Neither to India nor to Christianity would the Vedantization of Christianity be a boon. The Vedantization of Christianity would spell the resurgence of Gnosticism and all the spiritual and moral complications that might follow.<sup>3</sup> It is no accident of history that science and philosophy should have reached an unprecedented height in countries where Vedantic thought had little or no influence. Social service and philanthropic activities have flourished more in those parts of the world where Sankara's writ does not run. A logical fiction like the Absolute may satisfy Meister Eckhart, but only the God of love can inspire a Saint Francis of Assisi; it can confidently be asserted that the spirit of Christianity has found expression more in St. Francis than in Meister Eckhart.

There is enough in New Testament theology to exercise the best minds of Europe and Asia. Clement of Alexandria and Origen elaborated their Christology in the light of the knowledge and experience they had. Let Indian Christians get back to the leaders of the Catechetical School of Alexandria and learn to develop their Christology in the light of the special knowledge and experience they may have as Indians. It is not suggested here that Indian Christology should be a replica of the theology of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Some of the shortcomings which the Catechetical School has in common with the Vedanta should be eliminated in Indian Christology. Origen, Bādarāyaṇa and Sankara are unanimous as to the immutable and static character of the Supreme Reality; and they all think that contemplation

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<sup>2</sup>In Sanskrit literature life has been accepted; and joy of life is not altogether absent; in Indian art the same spirit of world-affirmation is evident. This has happened in spite of Hindu religion and Hindu philosophy. In the Upanishads and the Brahma-Sūtras myths and legends abound; and the historical outlook is absent. The Sūtras take the caste divisions for granted; and both Sankara and Rāmānuja agree that low-caste men cannot lay claim to the practice of that spiritual discipline which, the Vedanta thinks, leads to Moksha. Rāmānuja goes so far as to say that Bhakti-Yoga is not meant for low-caste people, for whom he recommends Prapatti. All these integral elements of the Vedanta bring out the essentially Hindu character of the system.

<sup>3</sup>The Gnosticism of Clement and Origen is not incompatible with the theology of the New Testament; this type of Gnosticism is in important aspects different from the Gnosticism of the heretical sects.

is the way to apprehend the Supreme Reality. The dynamic conception of God Who is ever active in history and Who unfolds His nature therein is very prominent in both the Old and the New Testament. Clement identifies this dynamic aspect of the Godhead with the Logos and seems to think that the Absolute is inscrutable and does not come within the range of experience or of history. It is permissible to hold that we know God only as He manifests Himself to us; Indian Christology may stress the fact that gnosis enables us to apprehend God only as He manifests Himself, and may bring out the implications of this view. Self-manifestation is of the essence of the nature of God; gnosis is for this reason an eternal process which is associated with history and is also independent of it.

The Vedantist asserts that the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman, but the Vedantic position has many logical and metaphysical difficulties. What exactly is the relation between the subject (knower of Brahman) and the predicate (Brahman)? Does Brahman know itself when the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman? Are there as many Brahmanas as there are knowers of Brahman? What happens to Triputi-Nyāya? Do the knower, the known and the knowing coalesce, with the first and perhaps also the last disappearing altogether? Is Vedantic Moksha another name for annihilation?<sup>4</sup> Origen's view seems to be that gnosis gives 'likeness' and not identity with the Godhead. This view is more reasonable and accords better with the theology of the New Testament.

Let Indian Christians now tackle the more difficult task that is waiting to be accomplished. Let them Christianize the Vedanta. A Christianized Vedanta would be a gift worthy of a free and independent India.

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<sup>4</sup>Quietism in Europe came very near the Vedantic conception of Moksha; Molinos and Madame Guyon were probably hankering after annihilation without knowing it. There is only one form of immortality that is personal immortality; other types are really euphemistic forms of annihilation. George Matheson was not thinking of annihilation when he wrote: 'I give Thee back the life I owe. . . .'